EARTH'S CRAMMED WITH HEAVEN
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Psalm 139:1–12
Matthew 13:1–9
Genesis 28:10–19

"Surely the Lord was in this place—
and I did not know it!"
Genesis 28:16 (NRSV)

Since our human lives cannot be lived apart from the rest of creation that sustains us,
might it be that "living in Christ" will mean living in communion with that word
that permeates the whole creation . . . and that therefore we not find God "in heaven,"
but right here in all our earthy reality? Then the whole creation must be viewed
with reverence, held in sacred trust not just as God's gift to us,
but as holy in its own right.

Where Is Your God?
Elaine M. Prevallet

Startle us, O God, with your presence, in the very midst of this life of ours.
Open our eyes to the beauty of creation, your handiwork.
Open our eyes to your image in others—in all those we encounter this day.
Open our spirits to the quiet, insistent coming of your Holy Spirit.
In Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Years ago I spent a month on a sailboat. I learned a lot about the ocean, tides, and wind. I learned that for miles off shore there are markers to help you navigate, avoid shallow places and sand bars, to help you know where you are with the help of a chart, and to guide you home. I also learned something about myself. Even though there is nothing wrong with my eyesight, I had a very difficult time seeing those important markers. There were four of us on board. At the beginning of our voyage, the skipper, a close friend who is an expert sailor, would ask me to look out and locate the markers and to use binoculars if necessary. Consistently I reported back,

“Sorry, Dick: there are no markers out there.” “There have to be,” Dick would respond; “have another look.” No markers. “Maybe you should let someone else look.” The only “someone elses” were our wives, so sheepishly I handed the glasses over—and usually my spouse found the markers, saw them immediately. Soon it became her duty. She could see what I was missing. If truth were told, a version of that experience continues: “Where’s the mustard? Have you seen my sunglasses, car keys, the book I’ve been reading?” If you are blessed, you have someone in your life who can see, someone with the gift of focus, attentiveness. If you do not and you are like me, you miss a lot and spend much time searching for glasses, car keys, books, and the mustard, which is, of course, exactly where it always is on the refrigerator shelf.

One dark night a man by the name of Jacob almost missed the most important encounter in his life. He’s on the run, banished from his family and community, terrified because he has swindled his brother, Esau, with the cooperation of their mother, Rebekah, and Esau has vowed to come to kill him on the day their father, Isaac, dies.

He is his mother’s favorite, Jacob is. Isaac, his father, who is old, feeble and blind, favors Esau, an outdoorsman, a skilled hunter. The brothers are twins. Esau was the first born. He will inherit the family’s wealth and the responsibility to manage and preside. He will be the head of the family, and what will happen is a kind of ceremonial conferring of the title, called a blessing, initiated by Isaac. The time comes for the blessing. Isaac plans a festive meal for his favorite son, Esau, and himself. Rebekah, who wants the blessing for her favorite, Jacob, plans and pulls off one of the greatest scams in history. She prepares her husband’s favorite meal, dresses Jacob in Esau’s clothes, puts goat skin on Jacob’s hands and neck to make him feel like Esau. No detail is overlooked. It works. Isaac gives the blessing, the inheritance, to Jacob, thinking he’s Esau. When Esau discovers what has happened, he is enraged and promises to kill his brother when their father dies. Rebekah intercedes again, sending Jacob off to the safety of her brother Laban’s household. Years later, when they finally meet again, Esau does the most remarkable thing: doesn’t kill his brother, but when he sees him approaching, bowing in humble contrition—and fear—surrounded by his wives, children, and servants, Esau runs, and the brothers embrace and weep together.

But this is the first night after the scam, after the vow to kill was uttered. Jacob is out in the wilderness, alone, lonely, terrified, exhausted. He has betrayed his brother and father; he has lied, cheated, stolen what was not his, and somehow he manages to lie down to sleep at the end of that frightful day, with a stone for a pillow.

During the night, Jacob has a strange dream: a ladder stretching to the heavens; angels ascending, descending. “We are climbing Jacob’s ladder,” the old camp song put it; “every rung goes higher, higher.” He has a vision of God speaking, God promising, God actually renewing a promise made to Jacob’s parents, Rebekah and Isaac, and his grandparents, long gone now, Sarah and Abraham. “I will be with you,” God promises Jacob. “I will keep you wherever you go. I will bring you home.”

There is a moment when you awake from a dream when you’re not exactly sure where you are or where the boundary is between the dream and reality. When Jacob awakened, it was dark and quiet, nothing moving but the desert wind, the rustling of leaves, maybe the first dim light of dawn on the horizon. Is someone there? Did that really happen? Was it a dream? Only a dream? Jacob was afraid that Esau might be out there in the darkness. But I imagine that this was an even deeper, more profound fear. Jacob was in the presence of something he did not expect or understand, something mysterious, and he was afraid.

Eighty years ago, German theologian Rudolf Otto broke new ground by suggesting that the experience of God is not an altogether rational, understandable phenomenon. Classic Western scholarship had turned God into an idea, a philosophic concept, and religious faith into an intellectual journey into deeper understanding. Faith begins, Otto argued, when human beings experience the mystical, not irrational but deep and profound and undeniably authentic. He called it the *mysterium tremendum.* In his book *The Idea of the Holy*, Otto wrote,

> The feeling of it may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide, pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship. It may burst in sudden eruption up from the depths of the soul. . . . It may become the hushed, trembling, speechless humility of the creature in the presence of—whom or what? In the presence of that which is mystery inexpressible.

Frederich Buechner says somewhere to trust your own experience of the sacred, to pay attention when you find yourself with tears in your eyes and a lump in your throat.

“I will be with you.” Jacob thought he had God confined to heaven. God, in the best thinking of the day—still a popular way of thinking about it—was the powerful but remote King of the Universe, off somewhere in the sky observing things on earth below. It is a neat and tidy and manageable system. God started things off, and ever since, human beings are on their own. That is challenged and changed in this remarkable account. God is not remote but here; transcendent but also imminent. Jacob is ambushed by God. Commenting on the text, Walter Brueggemann says, “The encounter

occurs in a place where no one would expect a religious experience. Jacob is a fugitive—he is not searching for God. He has no religious agenda—but is seeking safety from his brother. . . . Jacob assumed heaven and earth were entirely separate worlds, that God stays in heaven and that he, Jacob, travels alone." But wonder of wonders, "there is traffic between heaven and earth." "I will be with you and keep you wherever you go," God promises (see *Interpretation: Genesis,* pp. 242–244).

I need someone to help me see, and that is the job of poets—to help us see the Holy.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning:

> Earth's crammed with heaven,
> And every common bush afire with God:
> But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,
> The rest sit round and pluck blackberries
> ("Aurora Leigh")

I need someone who will help me see the markers, the tiny wildflowers in the spring, the hummingbird. "Pay attention!" the poets are saying. "Keep your eyes open."

The poems of Mary Oliver are full of wonder at the surprising beauty of the common stuff of life—a grasshopper, a hot summer day, a swan, flushed cheeks after a walk on a cold winter day, snowflakes on your shoulder. Her partner of forty years, Molly Cook, a distinguished photographer, died recently, and Oliver published a book of Cook's photographs, with a commentary and a few of her own poems. Its title is simply *Our World*, and the pictures are of the ordinary stuff of life: an old woman watching children play, an elderly couple eating breakfast, two French sailors, a boy with a telescope—the beautiful, ordinary people one encounters but does not always see every day. Mary Oliver explains that looking at the world is an important part of who she is and that Molly Cook taught her to pay equal attention to people.

We live at such an incredibly fast pace. Life is full, appointments all day long, places to go, people to see, schedules to keep. Americans tend to fill up every moment with activity so that the normal, less busy moments—mealtimes, for instance—also succumb to the rush. We eat "fast food" on the run. Someone told me last week that he and his wife don't sit down for meals much but mostly eat standing up in the kitchen, leaning over the sink.

I read an essay last week by a psychotherapist who is also a spiritual director. She observed that most of us don't see or experience the holy in the middle of our lives. She writes, "Many of us are juggling so many things

that we are run by our lives rather than living them as gifts from God. What if we could learn to stop for a moment many times a day? What if in those moments we could decide to notice the sheer miracle of being alive? We would then be taking awe breaks instead of coffee breaks" (Gunilla Norris, "The Heart of Responsibility," *Weavings*, July/August 2008).

This old story contains the unique Judeo-Christian idea that earth's crammed with heaven, that there is traffic between heaven and earth, that you and I encounter God in the dailiness of life, in the ordinary, the common: God in the intricate wonder of a summer flower, in the mysterious vastness of a starry night, in a three-year-old's curiosity and energy, in the smile of a stranger, the touch of a beloved. God here in the earthiness of life.

This old story bids us to pay attention, to slow down and see, to take awe breaks every day as well as coffee breaks, to make time and space for God to be with us and touch us.

And this old story promises the most important thing I can think of: "I will be with you and keep you wherever you go."

> "Where can I go from your spirit?" the psalmist asked.
> "Or where can I flee from your presence?
> If I ascend to heaven, you are there:
> If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
> If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
> Even there your hand shall lead me
> and your right hand shall hold me fast."

"I will be with you and keep you wherever you go—and I will bring you home." Brueggemann says the "seeds of incarnation" are in that promise.

Centuries later a child was born whose name was Emmanuel, God with us. We believe that child, the man the child became, was indeed God among us, living our life, growing into adulthood as we do, experiencing everything—the joys and hopes and disappointments, the high energy of life and times of weariness. That he, Emmanuel, "God with us," suffered as we do and died our very death in all its dreaded finality—and rose again. We believe that he, Jesus Christ, is the fulfillment of that ancient promise, that because of him we are never alone—

> not in the deepest darkest night of the soul
> not the exile of guilt and remorse
> not in the isolation of pain and fear
> not even in the face of death

There was a lovely event that happened in Washington last week. Senator Edward Kennedy returned to the Senate following diagnosis and surgery for brain cancer. One of his closest friends is Senator Orrin Hatch, a conservative Republican with whom Kennedy disagrees on nearly everything. But they are the best of friends.

Hatch wrote a song in tribute to his friend's return to the Senate, *Headed Home*. The words are a little sentimental: "Through the darkness, we can find a pathway, that will take us halfway to the stars. Sailing home. Sailing home." It's about Kennedy sailing and returning home to the Senate, but I can't help but wonder if Orrin Hatch wasn't also thinking about that blessed promise that came in the middle of the night long ago to a man called Jacob.

"I will be with you and keep you wherever you go. And I will bring you home."

"Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it."

Amen.